DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 561 TM 014 590

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TITLE A New Look at Student Achievement. Critical Issues in Student Achievement. Paper No. 2.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, Tex.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
CONTRACT 400-86-0008
NOTE 23p.; For related documents, see TM 014 589 and TM 014 591.
AVAILABLE FROM Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 E. 7th Street, Austin, TX 78701-3281. ($3.00 plus $1.50 shipping and handling).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Educational Assessment; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Participation; *Process Education; *Program Improvement; Reading Instruction; Thinking Skills; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

To enhance activities and programs directed toward improving the teaching of reading, writing, and thinking skills in the southwest region, this document, part of a series of papers on this issue is presented. A new look at student achievement is necessary because the information age is making new demands. There has been a shift in education away from a focus on the products of education toward a focus on the processes that support the understanding and usefulness of the content. The trend in process-based education is to increase the range of experiences incorporated in an instructional sequence. New approaches to diversifying the educational environment include the use of partnerships with parents and businesses and the use of technology. New process-oriented assessment and performance indicators also form part of the school reform movement. The socio-economic context in which the education system functions is another factor influencing the definition of student achievement. It is helpful to define student achievement in terms of an integrated framework of factors to evaluate the significance of the effects educational reform efforts have. An example of a successful school improvement project is Parents as Partners in Reading, a parent involvement program in Louisiana. Such a program addresses tomorrow's problems today. (SLD)

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CRITICAL ISSUES
IN
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A NEW LOOK AT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Paper Number 2
Winter 1988

Published by
SEDL
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Sponsored by the
OERI
Office of Educational Research and Improvement

TM014590

Acknowledgement

Many thanks are due to Dee Seligman for the hours of shared brainstorming and conceptualizing the integrated framework of student achievement. In addition, the efforts of Dee, Pat Duttweiler, Kris Taylor, and Ida Jean Holman in sharpening and refining this paper are greatly appreciated. Many thanks go to Lonne Parent for her creativity, patience, and willingness to try new programs. Finally, thanks to Pam Rowe and Penny Seago for their fine administrative and production work.

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PREFACE

Critical Issues Papers are a series of bi-annual publications issued by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) programmatic effort entitled *Facilitating Student Achievement in Reading, Writing, and Thinking Skills, with Partnerships and Technology.* The goal of this effort is to contribute to the improvement of programs/activities in the Southwestern region for teaching reading, writing, and thinking skills by providing research and development-based information, training, and/or technical assistance concerning such effects for facilitating student achievement through a variety of strategies, including uses of partnerships and technology.

In order to accomplish this goal, SEDL has identified the following key objectives which guide its scope of work:

- To identify from research and practice promising strategies, approaches and/or programs that can enhance student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; community/parent partnerships; and technology.

- To establish collaborations with selected staff members of agencies, organizations, associations, and others who can help translate research-based knowledge and tools into effective practice in SEDL's region to impact student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

- To provide information, training, and technical assistance that will empower SEDL's collaborators to help facilitate student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

- To disseminate information on research-based knowledge and tools for improving student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology to a range of regional audiences.

SEDL's initiative to facilitate student achievement in reading, writing, and thinking skills, with partnerships and technology will result in the following:

- A highly trained cadre of partners able to provide direct services to teachers and others in facilitating student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

- A number of publications including (1) updates on student achievement, (2) Critical Issues Papers, (3) a major synthesis document on what works in facilitating student achievement in reading, writing, and thinking skills, with partnerships and technology, and (4) a final document detailing the process for establishing cooperative partnerships that can help facilitate student achievement.

The first *Critical Issues Paper*, **An Integrated Approach to Facilitating Student Achievement** (SEDL, Summer, 1988) discussed the demographic, economic, and legislative background for educational reform—specifically in the fundamental content areas of reading, writing, and thinking skills, as well as the role of enabling factors such as school/parent/community partnerships and technology to effect the facilitation of student achievement.

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A NEW LOOK AT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

by

Magdalena Rood, Ph.D.

> *No nation spends more money to educate its children than the U.S., yet on all international aptitude tests, U.S. kids score in the lower third in comparison with other industrialized nations. Future prosperity depends on a populace that can master complex technologies, and today one in five Americans can barely read a menu. The nation can no longer afford to educate simply for the sake of education, public education must be geared toward the educational requirements of the twenty-first century. Our current system reflects misplaced national values; our culture rewards people who can float junk bonds and think up new ways to put together corporate mergers. We need to start rewarding people for turning ideas into useful products. No amount of public spending can keep a child in school if education is not encouraged in the home. No law will keep people from crime or drugs if they don't have the skills to make it in society.* (Lamm, 1988)

BACKGROUND

The single most critical issue in education today is student achievement. This is the issue that stands at the center of the furor about school restructuring, accountability, teacher performance, and our endangered future as a nation. It is a national concern that today's students are not achieving the level of performance that American students demonstrated in the past, and that they are performing at an alarmingly low level in comparison with their international counterparts. Publicized in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk*, this concern was the impetus for nationwide school reform movements, with numerous legislative mandates enacted to address the problems of low student achievement.

Across the nation state legislatures enacted comprehensive education reform packages designed to address the problems of low educational performance and school improvement. In the Southwest these reform efforts fall into five categories, each of which was ultimately intended to improve student achievement (SEDL, 1988):

- Improvements in the organization and structure of schools
- Improvements in school finance
- Improvements in curriculum and school programs
- Improvements in the standards for educational personnel
- Improvements in general educational standards

Current Status

Reviewing the progress of national school improvement efforts, former Secretary of Education Bennett (1988) warns that although the downward slide of the past decades in student achievement has been arrested, the upward swing is not moving fast enough. The states have increased spending for education, national SAT and ACT scores have increased somewhat since 1983, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates some small improvement in basic literacy (the ability to read and write) and science. It is becoming increasingly true, however, that for people who must live and work in an increasingly complex and technological society, basic levels of achievement will no longer be enough. The essential, required achievement of the information age is the ability to **think** about what they are **reading** and **writing**.

> *American business needs workers who are not only proficient in basic skills, but who know how to think and can communicate what they are thinking; workers who can adjust to change, who can absorb new ideas and share them easily with others. In other words, to ensure our well being as a nation, we need people who have learned how to learn* . (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1987)

The issue of student achievement is critical at this time because the educational system has failed to meet the demands of the political-societal-economic system. It is essential that all American students be adequately educated, because not only do the rights and responsibilities of living in a democratic society require the ability to make informed decisions, the national mechanism of funding social services is dependent on the earnings of the current workforce. Today, business leaders consider the public school system a failure, requiring them to spend $25 billion a year to teach new employees skills they should have acquired at school (Ordovensky, 1988). Most forecasts of the future predict that with the advancement of the Information Age, prerequisite work skills will become increasingly sophisticated—or they will become increasingly automated and menial. The distance between the earning potentials for the sophisticated information based career fields and the automated menial ones will likewise increase.

The school system is having trouble teaching students today what was needed yesterday, much less what they will need tomorrow.

ISSUES IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

To a large extent the real challenge for school improvement efforts is the lack of clear definition of what the term **student achievement** means. Much of the educational reform legislation established performance on certain standardized tests as the measure of achievement. Consequently, there is a regional, as well as national trend to use these standards as operational definitions of student achievement, thereby focusing all reform efforts at improving performance

on a specified standardized test. Instead of focusing on the quality of education, students are taking minimum competency exams. As a result schools must teach for minimum competencies rather than reaching for the goal that each student achieve his or her potential. Education comes to mean preparing students to answer questions, to pass tests — not to think, not to solve problems.

The emergence of state-legislated mandates for educational reform has had several interesting consequences because (1) these changes were initiated at the top of the system and imposed on the lower level changes that reduced local autonomy; and (2) the business principles of accountability as modeled in legislative actions are not inherently applicable to education. In the wake of legislative action, education practitioners were left to find ways to meet the mandates. And, because educators, like legislators, have been striving to improve student achievement, practitioners were faced with the challenge of meeting state mandates and still improve schools.

Educational research and practice has responded with a counter-movement based on the premise that true educational reform must begin in the schools, and should reclaim the value of teacher observations and student work in assessing student achievement. The real promise of this counter-trend lies in the growing agreement between researchers and practitioners on the need for site-based management, and shared decision-making (Duttweiler, 1988) and educational reform aimed at providing students with the skills needed for effective living, learning, and working.

Far more than the ability to perform well on standardized achievement, the definition of student achievement must include factors related to:

- The individual learner
- The educational context
- The socio-economic milieu

Issues Related to the Student

The need for a broader definition of student achievement is underscored by current theories of learning as a dynamic process in which the student constructs meaning by using his or her existing knowledge and experience to interact with the task as perceived from the nature of the information provided and the instructional context (Beyers, 1987; Perkins, 1986; Presseisen, 1987). The student's existing knowledge is the sum of his or her experience, dispositions, attitudes, interests,

skills, and goals, a major proportion of which is already present by the time the child reaches the usual school-starting age of five (Bloom, 1964). Thus, before a student enters the educational system, his or her life experiences have already impacted the development of his or her potential adult intellectual achievement. The importance of these experiences is especially striking in comparing children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The interconnected influences of home environment and cultural background entail:

- differences in the degree to which the child feels powerless or powerful, and realistically expects reward for effort; in *what* he strives for, and *how* he goes about the task of means-end analysis.

- differences in exposure to situations and opportunities that help children develop use of language and the ability to think in different ways, to develop social control and interaction, and to plan and reach goals.

- differences in the patterns of reciprocity into which the child moves—what parents expect, what teachers demand, what peers anticipate—all of which operate to shape outlook and approach in the young (Bruner, 1973)

But there is no reason to believe that the effects of child rearing [conditions] are either inevitable or irreversible — there are ways of altering the impact of middle-class pressures or of poverty. (Bruner, 1973)

Americans have long held the belief that the future of this nation lies with its young people. The failure to tap all those minds, the loss of human potential, is the greatest mistake that this nation could make. The school system is having trouble teaching students today what was needed yesterday, much less what they will need tomorrow. While there are excellent educational programs, many school improvement efforts miss their most essential targets, the students at risk of dropping out. The system's failure to more fully develop and enhance the talents of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whose potential is equal to that of the middle class but whose achievement is unequal today (Chambers, 1988), leads to shortfalls in America's ability to advance economically and seriously endangers the nation's ability to take care of its population.

In the Southwest the growth of the school-aged population is expected to slow down through the end of the century (Kelly, 1988). In 1986, 30 percent of the people in the Southwest region were under the age of eighteen. By 1990, it is estimated that the number of people under age eighteen will decline to 28.4 percent, and by 2000 to only 26.6 percent. However, there are several growth

trends in the Southwest worth noting: (1) the birth rate among teenage and unmarried mothers is increasing; (2) Hispanics have the lowest median age and the highest fertility rate of all population groups, and (3) immigration is increasing the heterogeneity of the population. These trends raise the following issues:

- Teenaged mothers (most of whom are Black and/or come from low SES backgrounds) show a high incidence of giving birth to under-weight babies. Among other problems, low birth weight is related to learning difficulties.

- Unmarried women head-of-households are increasingly likely to be poor, and the per capita income for Hispanic and Black families is substantially below that of White families. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) income and ethnicity appear to be the variables most closely related to low student performance on all indicators (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1987).

- Parental education, concludes the NAEP, is another dependable predictor of the child's level of achievement. Schools do not, as a matter of course, have the funding or the resources to offer special programs to keep teenaged mothers or other at-risk students in school.

- Typical occupations for Hispanics and Blacks are more likely to be manual labor or machinery operations, with limited opportunity for growth. As the White population ages and the population shifts, it will be especially important for Hispanic and Black students to be prepared for higher-level positions.

Over the next twenty to thirty years the Southwest's school-aged population will become increasingly different from the population that the system has evolved to serve—Anglo, middle-class students with two literate parents and fairly predictable home situations. Students with less learning readiness were in the minority and could typically be handled in "special education" programs. However, students are increasingly heterogeneous, bringing vast cultural and experiential differences into the classroom. The school system will have to adapt its curriculum and placement policies accordingly.

Issues Related to the Educational Context

The education system encompasses all levels of agencies and organizations that impinge on the context in which the student is expected to perform. Educational systems are, for the most part, financed by the state, and, therefore, are in competition with critical issues in other sectors for limited state funds. While financing education is among the top priorities of states across the nation, because the economies of the states in the Southwest are in crisis, the issue of educational funding is in continual flux between public recognition for the need to improve student achievement and the reluctance of voters to increase their taxes.

Another aspect of educational funding is the issue of teacher salaries, which continue to fall below that of other professions. In the Southwest teacher salaries are on the average even lower than the national average. Talented students who could be top teachers are not attracted to a profession so low in pay, which is in reality a symptom of a more serious social issue of prestige (McGee, 1987). Professions that are highly valued in the culture receive adequate or better compensation even in times of great financial difficulty. This culture expects teachers to improve the level of student of performance under increasingly demanding conditions with scarcely visible public support, whether financial or social.

Instead of getting support, teachers are forced to take competency exams to ensure their continued employment. Since the exams resulted from legislative action, instead of being initiated by the profession itself, many educators resent having to take them and question their validity. Rather than supporting teachers' efforts to facilitate student achievement, the system focuses on performance on test measures far removed from the actual classroom. Here again is the issue of assessment and its place in education; whether the design of instruction should be driven by the measure of its effect or the measure of effect should be designed to meet the purpose of instruction.

The educational context is a troubled environment that lacks clear focus. It emphasizes measured segments of instruction and measured indicators of performance, instead of helping students explore the depth and spread of their interests and making learning exciting for them and for their teachers alike. The student achievement issues that emerge from these trends are:

- In what ways can educational agencies impact individual potentials equally well for all students, while achieving the system's educational goals and objectives?

- In what ways can educational agencies assess that students have achieved their potentials and that schools have met their objectives?

CURRICULUM

Content It is curious that the Three R's of yesterday — Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic—have retained much of their importance, and indeed have become elaborated—Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmatic, and Reasoning have become the Four R's of the Information Age (Applebee, Langer, & Mullins, 1987; Education Daily, October 25, 1988). What has changed in the context of education is a shift in focus away from products (i.e., factual and static knowledge of content) to the processes (i.e., abilities and skills) that support the understanding and usefulness of content. The Four R's continue to gain importance because the currency of the information age is ideas (McCune, 1988), and the investment strategies involved in gathering, generating, and communicating ideas are **reading**, **writing**, and **thinking**.

What a student studies is the best predictor of educational success. (Bennett,1988)

To enable students to prosper in the information age, they need to be prepared to think. Content changes daily, there is hardly a field of study that is not experiencing increasingly rapid expansion. It is of growing importance that students learn how to *find* and *use* information in general, and that they learn the intellectual processes of content disciplines in particular (Costa, 1985; Presseisen, 1988). Content does influence process; thus it is not a question of teaching process rather than content. The primary change in the function of education is to teach students processes by means of content. This entails teaching students how to seek information, how to explore information, how to develop alternative responses, how to select the best response, and how to refine that response.

The issues emerging from the trend toward process-based instruction focus on ways to teach content to promote the development of process, ways to improve and increase the use of instructional methods to promote the learning of process, and ways to assess the effectiveness of these methods.

- Instructional Methods Education has always operated on the implicit assumption that information learned in one context (i.e., the school) transfers spontaneously to another

context (i.e., work) (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). This inordinately optimistic view is not supported by research. To help students use their knowledge outside of content-specific situations, specific instructional efforts are necessary. The trend in the new process-based instructional methods is to increase the range of experiences incorporated in an instructional sequence. In contrast to the mastery approach to achieving a narrow range of operations and facts, the newer methods seek to broaden the scope of the student's knowledge in order to make it more meaningful and useful. Two approaches to diversifying the educational environment are the use of partnerships and technology.

- Partnerships Researchers and practitioners alike are re-evaluating the educational role of parents before and during a child's school years, (Henderson, 1987; Scott-Jones 1988; Rich, 1988). In 1984 the bellwether state of California designed a project to assist education professionals to develop effective strategies for working collaboratively with parents to improve student achievement. Many other states have now implemented parent-involvement programs that encourage schools and parents to work together on helping students learn both in the school and in the home.

  Similarly, educators are re-evaluating the educational role of communities and business. As evidenced by the outbursts of corporate leaders in the recent past, the interest that business is taking in the outcome of education has changed, and there is a changing trend in the nature of school/business partnerships[1], with increasing numbers of them involving in-depth work with students in instructional activities. These partnerships are helping students understand the connection between what they learned in the classroom and how it applies to 'real world' problems.

- Technology To some extent the changes in educational goals to meet the changing realities of our culture are being driven by developments in technology. The ability to use technology is becoming an expected educational outcome, and in increasing cases an absolute requirement for employment. Two important trends in the use of technology for education are: (1) the use of distance technology to share instructional resources among schools and to offer courses to multiple sites; (2) and a new approach to computer-assisted-instruction that uses the technology to provide

opportunities to question and explore ideas that help the learner expand her understanding (Educational Technology Center, 1988).

The issues that emerge from these instructional trends concern the need for training and program development, both of which are expensive and time consuming.

- Assessment methods. Assessment, and performance indicators, are an integral part of the school reform movement. The importance of considering the type of assessment used is inherent in the limitations of different formats. Over the past several decades objective tests (for example, multiple choice items) have become the most often used tool to assess levels of achievement or levels of mastery. One of the major drawbacks to the use of objective test items is that these require students to demonstrate only the most superficial and limited knowledge of facts, concepts, and theories, and therefore are essentially incompatible with the authentic knowledge of process (Greenebaum, 1988; Marzano & Costa, 1988). Especially in the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and thinking, the types of evidence gained through objective, and standardized, achievement indicators communicate very little about the quality or substance of a student's learning achievement, and the type of learning measured is often considered superficial and contrived.

The counter trend is an increasing interest in assessment techniques that attempt to gain the most complete information about student progress possible (Applebee, 1987; Calfee, 1988; Kneedler, 1985; Teale et al., 1987; Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Wittrock, 1987; Wixson & Peters, 1987). Current research extends assessment beyond tests that limit the scope of learning, to tests worthy of being taught to, augmented by longitudinal records of the student's process (Lucas, 1988). Approaches to assessing the learning of process as well as content include the use of expository tasks, exhibitions, and portfolios or profiles (Archbald & Newmann, 1988).

- Expository tasks—written, or sometimes oral, exams involving the student in a content related task to explain, analyze, or solve a problem. As part of the task the student is provided with the evaluation criteria. The finished task is scored by two or more more trained raters[2] on criteria ranging from a holistic impression of quality to a series of weighted scores for the primary traits of the task, for example

organization and use of writing/expository processes, use of facts, concepts, and theories, and use of reference materials, for example.

- Exhibitions—production of discourse, artifacts, and performances for the public, usually requiring integration of a broad range of competencies and considerable initiative and responsibility. Exhibitions range from such major projects as the production of video tapes or publications to public debates. Standards of achievement may be clarified with public exhibition of mastery as achieved by a broad range of students.

- Portfolios and Profiles—longitudinal collections that furnish a broad portrait of individual performance in several dimensions to give a comprehensive and cumulative view of achievement. Portfolios consist of a variety of student-produced artifacts and rewards that document the student's experiences and accomplishments. Profiles consist of ratings and summary descriptions that teachers, students, and sometimes parents, fill out to document achievement.

The primary issue that emerges from the trend toward using process-oriented assessment and multiple indicators of student achievement is a need to examine the values and ideology that drive the purpose for assessment. Through the use of standardized assessment measures, certain types of outcomes, like high test scores, are endorsed while the underlying knowledge bases which these instruments purport to measure become devalued. The new process-oriented measures, however, require the commitment of time and resources, patience, and creativity to develop and adapt new approaches.

Issues Related to the Socio-economic Milieu

Another factor influencing the definition of student achievement is the larger socio-economic context in which the education system functions. Ultimately, education prepares students for successful participation in their communities. Education, however, has traditionally been left up to the professionals. Recent changes in demographics and economics have caused changes in the traditional role of the school in the community. With an aging population there is a greater need for schools to extend services beyond traditional K-12 education. Also, there are incidences of schools entering into partnerships with other community entities to install communication devices that may be shared at reduced costs for all (Kitchen, 1987; Lanier, 1986). Finally, there

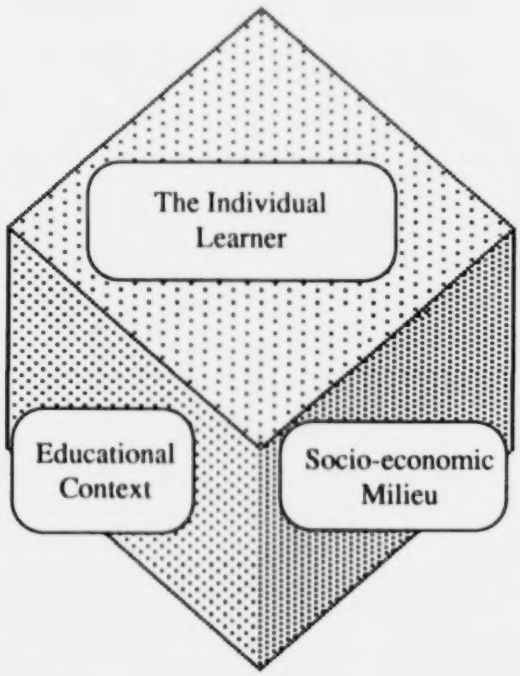
have been several instances in which schools play active roles in the vitalization of the community (Dobbs, Note 1; Rosenfeld, 1985). Examples of such activities include (SEDL, Note 2):

- School-Based Enterprises in Georgia, in which students, as part of their curriculum, to offer three services that enhance the community's tourist economy: a retail store selling local "cottage-industry" goods, an excursion train, and a community theatre.

- A collaboration of four school districts in Arkansas which sponsors profit-making enterprises to teach students marketable skills. Activities have included operating a town newspaper, a skating rink, a child-care center, a handyman employment service, and a photography lab.

The educational issues that arise out the socio-economic context concern the relevance of education to the community and its continued growth. The productivity of students while they are in school contributes greatly to the school's positive role in the community whether it involves student enterprise or it serves as a persuasive factor in attracting new or relocating businesses.

AN INTEGRATED VIEW OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



The three factors discussed—the individual learner, the educational context, and the socio-economic milieu—are, by nature, highly interactive with each exerting important influence on the others. The design of the educational system is based on a societal expectation that what is learned in school directly impacts an individual's performance outside of school. For example, a student who earns poor grades in his or her courses, has a high incidence of disciplinary actions or a poor attendance record, and performs poorly on standardized tests is not likely to be highly productive upon leaving school. Conversely, the student who takes higher level courses, earns good grades and performs well on standardized tests is expected to become a productive citizen.

Changes in this interaction may come from any of the three factors. Students with histories of low achievement may discover new sources of personal motivation to pursue academic degrees or informal courses of study. Or, at the other extreme of the achievement continuum, high achieving students may suffer from personal tragedy resulting in a loss of interest or ability to perform well. Likewise, low-achieving students may receive intervention through school improvement efforts that function to make education more meaningful and important, while a bad school may disaffect talented and gifted students. Finally, a community organization, such as a youth group may serve to re-direct a student's energies and interests to educational achievement, while another sort of youth group—the gang—may serve to redirect a student's energies and interests in a different direction.

Another school improvement trend, led by the United States Department of Education (1986) has evolved in efforts to identify exemplary and promising programs, strategies, and practices to facilitate student achievement, in order to build an information base about such efforts that may be used by other educators to support and stimulate their own efforts. The Department's National Diffusion Network offers an extensive funding and dissemination structure for programs proven effective in improving student performance. Another Department division, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) sponsors searches for exemplary and promising programs through the Regional Education Laboratories. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory is involved in several of these projects, including this programmatic effort on Facilitating Student Achievement.

The search for promising or exemplary practices involves the determination of criteria of success. It is especially useful to define achievement in terms of an integrated framework of factors to evaluate the significance of the effects that these efforts have on student achievement.

EXAMPLE PROGRAM

PARENTS AS PARTNERS IN READING

Overview

For two hours every Friday morning, forty mothers of disadvantaged kindergarten, first, and second grade students gather in the elementary school library in Donaldsonville, Louisiana to learn how to read to their children. Sometimes not able to read themselves, these women are learning how to teach their children to think about stories and books, and connect that information with what they already know. During the course of their work they create little story books and materials for use with their children; they learn to ask questions about sequencing and comparing, and other thinking skills; and they practice reading to their children with on the spot feedback about their performance.

Initiated under the leadership of Principal Mary Chauff, the purpose of the project is to improve student literacy in the early years of elementary school, and to increase parental involvement in the real educational aspects of the school rather than simply in clerical and support functions.[3] Developed by Dr. Patricia Edwards, Assistant Professor of Education at the Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, *Parents as Partners in Reading* is based on research in reading and education indicating the strong relationship between early childhood reading experiences in the home and later academic achievement (Edwards, Notes 3 and 4).

Also a strong believer in the effects of the social and cultural values of the community on the success of an intervention program, Dr. Edwards rallied broad support in the community among business and religious leaders (Chauff, Note 5). Now in its second year, community volunteers have ensured child care so that mothers can attend the meetings and providing transportation to those who need it, as well as creating a favorable community climate for the success of the program. The entire project was started on a grant of $500, used for video tapes and beginning

materials. This year the project is funded by $2000 from the school district. These funds are used to pay five parent-trainers $20.00 per two-hour session. These mothers participated in the first year of the project and are now part of the training team for the other mothers; they plan activities, develop materials, and participate in demonstrating and explaining during the sessions. One of the benefits for all the mothers involved is the opportunity to check out up to five books at a time from the school library.

The Students

Given that some of the most important influences on student achievement are the early childhood experiences in the home and that the home continues to have significant impact on achievement throughout most of the grade levels, this program targets interventions at the most critical impact points in its target audience. Immediately from the onset of the program, the student experiences a greater degree of parental involvement in a school activity. A subject that is important in school is now also important at home, thus increasing the student's estimation of the value of reading.

The interactions in which mothers are taught to engage while reading and the contents of the reading materials consist of those generally accepted by practitioners and researchers as essential basic building blocks of intellectual development. *Parents as Partners in Reading* most directly affects the students' readiness for learning, or helps the student begin to learn how to learn. It supports student achievement in the generalized processes of reading, communicating, and thinking, simultaneously focusing on student achievement in grade-appropriate school subjects, like the alphabet, colors, locations, sequences, comparisons, and so forth, while establishing a supportive learning climate in the home.

The Educational Context

Parents as Partners in Reading is a school improvement project. The initiative for the effort came from the school itself. Already recognized as an excellent school, the effort grew out of a perceived need to continue to strive for improvement. The design and development of the program enlisted many of the school personnel in participating and supporting the progress of both parents and students. While teachers are involved in helping match the content and subjects of the program to those of the classroom, librarians help parents in the library. Other school personnel know the mothers by name.

Although none of the school's personnel is directly involved in the project, the school has achieved success by its participation in increased parental understanding and support for its programs. In addition, the project is directly affecting the success of the school's educational programs by its focus on both real academic skills as well as student attitude. The positive results being experienced in this project has made it possible to initiate another parental involvement program for at-risk students in the middle elementary grades entitled *Project TOUCH*. Mrs. Chauff reports that parents of the other children are becoming curious why they can't be part of these extra services of the school, like access to the school library.

The Socio-economic Milieu

Donaldsonville, Louisiana, is a small rural community in the Mississippi Valley. Economically Donaldsonville is highly dependent on the petro-chemical plants that line the river offering low-level employment to area residents. Donaldsonville's population is largely Black. An emerging critical issue in the Mississippi Valley, and therefore Donaldsonville, is the high rate of cancer associated with the petro-chemical industry. While providing a relatively stable economy, national environmental attention focused on the area could cause changes in the way these plants operate, or even whether they continue to operate in that location. The communities in the area are now in that "Window of Opportunity" when concerted economic development efforts might help to avoid potential economic disasters. Education, and improving the level of achievement of its citizens, has long been accepted as the way out of poverty and essential to a community's economic development efforts.

Because of Dr. Edward's early work to promote community interest, the news of the project is published in the newspaper weekly, the Catholic priest and his church deacon make public appearances on behalf of the project, and the parents at the other elementary school in the Parrish are beginning to wonder why they don't have a similar program. After only one year of the program a major indicator of success for the community is that the Public Broadcasting Network at both the national and the state levels, has televised programs featuring the Donaldsonville reading project.

The Donaldsonville *Parents as Partners in Reading* project is providing solutions today for tomorrow's problems.

END NOTES

[1] The changing nature of educational partnerships is in part evidenced by an annual symposium under the auspices of The Presidential Commission on Private Sector Initiatives.

[2] The Inter-rater reliability, or the closeness of match between ratings depends on the level of training, the clarity of guidelines, and the range in scores used in judging. In typical studies matches are quite close. Generally, fewer than 10 percent of papers need to be re-read; 5 percent or less is considered desirable. For more information see Greenberg, Wiender, & Donovan (1986) *Writing assessment: Issues and strategies.* White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, Inc.

[3] Much of the following information was gathered during an on-site visit by the author on October 20, 1988.

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This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number 400-86-0008. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.